Hurricane Katrina: Voices from Inside the Storm December 6, 2005 1:00pm 2154 Rayburn House Office Building

Statement of Mr. Terrol Williams

I lived in uptown New Orleans, not far from Memorial Hospital. I'd finished paying for my house 3 years ago, and had started my own construction company. For the 18 years prior to that, I was a Computer Systems Engineer at the National Finance Center in New Orleans, as a federal employee. Initially, I decided not to evacuate because the storm was heading east of New Orleans. My decision was rational at the time, especially given the fact that the hurricane itself caused little damage to his house.

On Saturday before the storm hit, I recall hearing the mayor make one radio announcement calling for a mandatory evacuation. As Katrina made landfall, I listened to a battery-powered radio; the information I was getting was "non-information". The announcer was saying the same things over and over ("stay in your home etc."). After the storm had passed through, radio announcers were mostly reporting horror stories from downtown (including the convention center and superdome). People were also calling in with accounts of the damage they had seen throughout the city. On Monday, there was no real information about what the government was doing, and I assumed the pumps were already working to pump water out of the city.

On Monday or Tuesday, I went to check on my mother, who was also living uptown. Physically, she was unharmed and hadn't needed to go to the attic or roof to escape the water. I and my brother got her out with a raft. At this point, there was 10 feet of water in some areas, and I was unable to return to his house. My brother took our mother to safety, and I took a boat (left behind by fire rescue crews) to my house. There was about 6 feet of water at my home, so I rescued my dog and returned to my mother's house.

I was there for about a week (until Sept. 8th or so), at which point a rescue crew, comprised of state and local police as well as armed military officers, forced me to evacuate. They arrived in a truck and two tanks and confiscated my weapons. I didn't resist them and the officers weren't rough with me. As we were leaving my mother's house, the team came upon a group of teenage boys. The LA police officer told the teenagers they would have to evacuate, and when the kids resisted, he and the military officers pulled guns on them. The officers then escorted the teenagers to their car and told them to leave. At first, I felt it seemed excessive, but looking back and considering all of the stories about violence, I understand why they did that.

The rescue team took me to the convention center (which at this point was mostly empty), and from there I was immediately taken by helicopter to the airport. The airport was "chaos", with more soldiers than evacuees, and he spent one night there. The next morning, I was put on a Delta 757 plane along

with approximately 150 other evacuees—passengers weren't told where they were going until after the plane had taken off. Some people were upset, but most were just thankful to be leaving New Orleans. They landed at Dulles and were driven to the DC Armory— where people were outside cheering.

The Armory was also chaotic, especially given the different backgrounds of all the evacuees. I saw people trying to buy drugs and knew not to leave my personal items lying around because they would be stolen. I didn't fear for my safety, however, because there were so many armed guards. Even though the Armory was unorganized, there was a lot of presence by groups like the American Red Cross, FEMA (at this point, FEMA was already under scrutiny), Strong Families, HUD, the US Postal Service etc. The Department of State was also there offering some evacuees jobs that would last for 120 days. I stayed at the Armory for about a month—until the beginning of October.

I am now living in SW DC and am currently looking for a job with the federal government. My family has spread out to Colorado, Texas, Alabama, and North Carolina. My ex-wife is hoping to return to New Orleans—her house in Algiers had minimal damage.

Overall, I don't think the federal response was racially motivated in any way—I think the Federal government was simply unprepared and incorrectly staffed for a natural disaster. On the state level, I think the Guard should have been federalized for greater coordination of efforts. At the local level, I think the biggest failure was that leadership didn't take into account the fact that poor residents had no way of evacuating. I also think Governor Blanco should have called for a mandatory evacuation sooner and that Mayor Nagin should have coordinated better with Amtrak. Overall, I think the situation improved dramatically after General Honore became involved. I primarily wish I'd been given better information about the pumps and whether or not they were running because I was basing my decisions on the assumption they were already operating early in the week.